

BLOUINARTINFO

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A Conversation With Yashua Klos on Violence, Police, and Art,  
Modern Painters, BlouinArtInfo - 1/3<http://bit.ly/1GQHb1R>

## A Conversation With Yashua Klos on Violence, Police, and Art

BY MODERN PAINTERS | JUNE 14, 2015



Yashua Klos's "Face on Plane 1", 2014 and "Pass Through This," 2014  
(Shani Ha)



Yashua Klos in the studio.  
(Photo by Ray Llanos)

In the second in his series of interviews with African-American artists, Kambui Olujimi speaks with a Brooklyn-based multimedia artist working mostly in collage and printmaking, who was born and raised on the South Side of Chicago. Yashua Klos has taught painting and drawing at Hunter College and currently works with New York City teens in the Parsons college-prep Scholars Program. He is represented by the Tilton Gallery in New York and Galerie Anne de Villepoix in Paris.

### Kambui Olujimi: What was your experience and that of your community with the police in Chicago?

**Yashua Klos:** It's definitely always been a tense, or a terse, relationship. Before moving to New York as a young adult, when I was in high school, the community I grew up in was racially mixed, relative to most of the South Side of Chicago. But it's predominantly black, mixed incomes: There's lower income, middle income, and in that sense it's actually a diverse neighborhood — but again, this is relative to Chicago, which is very segregated. And what I found interesting as a kid was that a lot of my friends' first interactions with the government was through the police. So the way we understood governmental control and rule in our lives was through police officers. They were the foot soldiers for the government. And beyond that, a lot of my peers' first interactions with white people was through those authority figures and the teachers at school.

### And what were those interactions like?

Interacting with the police was always antagonistic because we understood early on that we were assumed to be the problem and that the police were looking at us suspiciously. And as a teenager, of course, you're often breaking rules in school, your parents' rules in the house, and whatever it may be. So it was just solidified that we were in opposition to the police. Not that we were criminal, but that in their eyes we were. We didn't feel this antagonism was justified, but we understood that we were guilty until proven otherwise. The police were not friendly to us. It was a joke to ask for assistance of any kind from the police. Usually, interacting with police meant something had gone terribly wrong and that we were about to get in trouble, about to be caught, whether we were actually doing something illegal or not.

Once, I was with a group of friends, walking down the block, and police officers were already searching two other guys from the neighborhood — they had them against the car and they were going through their pockets. Me and my friends see this as we're walking — we see the police, the police see us — and there was a kind of silent mental communication between us and the group that was like, "Yo, don't nobody do nothing crazy, nobody get outta line, we just gonna keep walking." When we got to that intersection, some of us started to go left to cut the corner to avoid the police. And as soon as that happened, the police were like, "Get over here. What's going on?" They saw that some of us were nervous — we knew that we were going to be under interrogation just for being out there.

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Modern Painters, BlouinArtInfo - 2/3<http://bit.ly/1GQHb1R>**So would you say you had a feeling of perpetual guilt?**

Because I understood that I was already guilty, I felt that it didn't matter if I was actually guilty or not guilty. And, I think, in letting go of that, there's this antagonism, this sense of, if they think we're guilty, then what can we get away with? Because we know we're going to be caught no matter what.

**Growing up, did you feel like you could call the police?**

No. I never knew of police like they are in the TV shows, where they solve crimes. I never heard of that happening in real life — where something gets stolen or somebody gets murdered and the police catch the bad guy and justice happens. I remember once I had been robbed in my house; I woke up and there was a guy in the house. I was still half asleep when I saw him and he chased me through the house, tied my hands together in the closet, and robbed me. I didn't get hurt, and he just took some money and jewelry. But I was in high school, and of course when my mom got home she was panicking, she was freaked out, so she called the police — that's the right thing to do when your home is invaded. The police came, we filed a report, but I knew even then that nothing was going to come of it. Also, it felt as if they were looking at me like, how come I got robbed? Like what did I have to do with this? I felt a kind of suspicion coming from them about this situation where I was victimized. So I think you know even when you're asking for help, you still feel criminalized.

**Did you have interactions with the police as you got older?**

One thing that is branded in my mind happened when I was with some friends hanging out outside a club, just waiting for people to leave so we could talk to the girls. I was a little tipsy, and there was a construction horse in the street and I kicked it over. I did it intentionally. I was just kind of wylin' out. It wasn't in any way to hurt anybody — nobody was even there. So then this white unmarked car pulled up, and a guy yells out the window, saying "Come here." I thought it was really strange that a guy would just roll up next to me and tell me to come here. He says, "I saw what you did, get over here." And because I didn't know him, and this didn't seem right, I just kept walking.

**Was he in plain clothes or in uniform?**

Plainclothes; even the car was unmarked. He parks, hops out, and starts walking behind me. At this point, I start putting two and two together and I'm like, OK, this is a plain clothes cop — it must be because there's really no reason for this guy to be policing me. He walks up behind me briskly, so I knew he was on the move for me, so I turned around and started walking toward him. And when I walked toward him, he punched me. And this was a big dude. I mean, I was 16 years old and I was thin, say 120, back then. He must have been a 260-pound grown-ass man. So he punched me, and I punch him back. We're fighting in the street, me and this grown man. Out of nowhere another car pulls up, and, I think, three more officers jump out. One of them punched me in the stomach, and they held me up against the fence, threw me in the car, put the cuffs on me.

**Did any of them say anything about being police?**

Another car pulled up, uniformed officers. They had whooped me out of my shoes — I used to wear my shoes unlaced and real loose, so that wasn't hard to do. One of the uniformed officers, a woman, threw my shoes at my face through the window of the car while I was in the backseat, handcuffed. She said, "You going to jail tonight!" Then the original plainclothes cop gets in the car and starts driving. While he's driving, he's punching me in the face with his right hand while I'm in the backseat cuffed up. I couldn't go anywhere; I couldn't protect myself. So he's beating me, and I remember this weird moment when I was kind of blacking out for a second — I would black out and then my head would be against the window. He was still hitting me, and I looked at him and I said, "Why are you hitting me?" And he said, "Because you're a piece of shit." he was so angry, almost foaming at the mouth, like it was personal. He was like, *angry*. And I was like, "But you don't even know me." Something happened when I said that — it was this strange silent moment as it sank in. It just made him madder. He pulls around the corner and gets out the car, and he pulls me out the car. I had no shoes on, I remember I was in a puddle, and now my socks are all soaking wet. We were by a dark alley, and he was about to pull me into it. There was nobody out except for this one homeless woman pushing a cart. She comes over, looks at him and looks at me, in handcuffs, bleeding, and she asks him if he has a cigarette. He says no, and then she asks me. I say no. And then, I jetted.

**You ran, cuffed?**

Cuffed! In my mind I was like, does this fool think I'm about to follow him into this dark alley? I can out run this fat motherfucker easily. So I jet, cuffed, no shoes on. I ran four or five blocks, hid behind something. By the time I came out from hiding, I had gotten the cuffs in front of me. I asked a guy on the street if he had 35 cents for the pay phone, and he was like, "here, take whatever." From his reaction, I knew I must be fucked up. I called my mom, who came and got me. She's a public school teacher and had a friend, a fellow teacher who was married to a police officer. She told her the story and asked what we should do. The friend had a master key for the handcuffs but said her husband couldn't know anything about it and don't report this. That certainly increased my distrust of the authority.

**So nothing came of it?**

No.

**Did you go to the doctor?**

No doctor. I just recently discovered a drawing I did in high school art class a few days after it happened — a self-portrait of myself beat up, with a crown of the Chicago skyline on my head.

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Modern Painters, BlouinArtInfo - 3/3<http://bit.ly/1GQHb1R>**How did that inform you when you came to New York, with Amadou Diallo, Sean bell, etc.?**

For me, the one that was branded in my mind as a kid was Rodney King. The video footage of King getting beat by however many police officers — a circle of them around him, just whooping him. And the fact that they got off scot-free. As a kid, you keep seeing the justice system completely fail, and feeling rage, feeling fear, confusion. For me, that was a clear indication that America's quiet racism surfaces a lot. And that powerful system of racism doesn't apologize, it just keeps going and doesn't correct itself. If anything, the corrective is to make it even more secretive, more subtle.

And this is exactly what we saw with officer Darren Wilson murdering Mike Brown. Our system of racism is quiet: segregated neighborhoods, poverty, black folks pushed into these quarantined districts where we're supposed to stay out of the way. And when we resist injustice, they bring out tanks.

**Eric Garner's death was different from past injustices, in that we have videotape of the murder.**

We're in a great moment, with the Arab Spring example of how we can use social media and the technology that we carry in our pockets to create a community. And that community can galvanize and resist. Right now we're sort of in control; we can put a camera on the violence, we can bring attention to our situation. But you have to wonder, at what point will that resistance get figured out, co-opted. How will new oppressive measures be even savvier?

**How have these verdicts affected you psychologically and emotionally?**

When I heard about Eric Garner, I was still a little depressed about Darren Wilson getting acquitted. We're all trying to navigate our own tolerance of this oppression, and knowing that this violence against us is always looming. We have to exist, we have to survive, we have to go on and be happy. But we always know it's there. It might, in some ways, numb me. These are very hard feelings to deal with. And there's a part of me that just wants to shut down and retreat, like this is not happening — but I know it is happening, I know it's been happening. We can't move on until we've confronted this, until we've figured out how to resist it, until we've dealt with it. It's been hard.

**How do you move on, keep working, go to Art Basel Miami Beach?**

I went to Miami and I just really felt disgusted being in this very privileged, entitled, predominantly white, wealthy art world, so detached from these issues as a reality. The discussions there ignored the broader social reality, the current social moment. With the experiences I've been through and the things I've seen, the community I come from, and all that I stand for — sometimes that reality is in conflict with escaping into the privileged, entitled bubble of Miami. And it has made me start to think, Who am I as an artist? How much can I participate in the art world? How much can I compromise my belief in justice and the people and things I believe in for that privileged bubble? In what way can I infiltrate that bubble? And is it futile?

**How do you find yourself coping with and digesting the recent events as an artist?**

I always have to make work. The part that gets negotiated is how much of that practice do I feel I have to package for the larger art world? Also, how do I make sure that I'm not becoming reactionary, bitter, or biased? I'm not assuming that a wealthy art collector doesn't give a damn. I'm not assuming that.

**How do you deal with the arbitrariness of police violence, that it's not about anything you do? It's not like the officer said, "I hate this piece, it sucks, I'm gonna punch you in the face!"**

And that would be reasonable, because you have a good reason then — you hate the piece! You know, in that moment with the cop, it was clear to me that there was no triggering that person's humanity. And it became clear that it's not my job to convince somebody else of who I am, of my humanity. Or, at the very least, of my innocence. So there are those who are just going to operate that way, and I don't want to be on the defensive, having to preempt sympathy.

**You mentioned feeling that the police are an occupying army. Is it a question of armed struggle or of political change?**

I think it's gotta be social change, you know what I mean? It has to be a deep psychological change.

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